

## ***Fratelli Tutti*: A Continuation of Francis' Introduced Renewal for Catholic Social Thought**

Though only recently published, *Fratelli Tutti*, the new encyclical of Pope Francis, is already widely recognized as the third major document of his pontificate.<sup>1</sup> The new encyclical, however, must be seen in the context of his social thinking as expressed in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, on the joy of the Gospel and evangelization (2012) and the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015). *Evangelii Gaudium* centers on and deals with our relationship with God, and reflects on the task of evangelization, which includes a social dimension as argued in the fourth chapter. *Laudato Si'* in its turn starts from our relationship with creation, and how this problematic relationship reflects some distortions in our human relationships as well. Now, *Fratelli Tutti* focuses on our relationships with one another. It remains to be seen whether it is his final piece, but we could consider this triptych to be Pope Francis' particular contribution to Christian social thought. Consequently, I believe this encyclical cannot be seen in isolation from the others. In the same way we read in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'* about our interpersonal relations, this also means that this encyclical is not an accumulation as if it had repeated everything that *Laudato Si'*, for example, said about ecology.

As one part of the triptych, what does this new encyclical contribute to Pope Francis' social thought? And to Catholic social teaching in general?

What I want to argue here is that, in light of his whole pontificate, the encyclical does not really offer a new contribution to Catholic social teaching. Rather, it is a continuation of the renewal he had already begun from the start of his pontificate and expressed in the aforementioned documents, as I will try to show – and a deepening of this continuation. As Catholic social teaching aims to offer an interpretation of the 'signs of the times in light of the gospel', let us first look at how Pope Francis analyzes our times.

### **1. Signs of the Times: "Dark Clouds over a Closed World"**

Generally speaking (because he touches on many themes), the pope describes the paradoxes we currently live with: we have the impression that we live in a more unified world – think of the globalization of economy and technology – but nothing could be further from the truth. Whereas the first all too often leads to standardization and a 'false universalism' (§12) that looks down on private cultures and lifestyles, the second, digitalization, perhaps gives the impression that we are interconnected. But it is an 'illusion of communication' (§42ff) because there too we limit ourselves to like-minded people who confirm our own beliefs instead of questioning them, and so it is more a case of 'parallel monologues' (§200) than a real dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> I do not take into consideration his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, for it is no secret that this text was mainly written by his predecessor Benedict XVI and Pope Francis simply finished it.

This turns out to be symptomatic for our time: on the one hand the (economic and technological) possibilities and freedoms seem limitless but on the other hand we build ‘walls’ everywhere (virtual or not, digital or psychological) to protect ourselves against the ‘barbarians’ (§27), because we see the other as a danger and a threat.

As a side note: it is remarkable that although the letter is partly situated in the context of the pandemic, the coronavirus, it is only mentioned once as a virus. The (even) more harmful ‘viruses’ are, however, those which we ourselves are responsible for spreading, namely those of ‘racism’ and ‘radical individualism’.

But there is a vaccine (although Pope Francis does not use that word himself): love, whether we call it social friendship, political love, or fraternity. A love which makes us open up to the other, and in which the encounter is no longer merely a confrontation – but also, and above all, – an enrichment. Only in this way can we succeed in creating a world built on fraternity, so that, as Francis indicates: “God willing, after all this, we will think no longer in terms of “them” and “those”, but only “us”.” (§35)

This love is expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan. It is striking how the Pope reduces all the diversity and distinctions we make in our coexistence to this one distinction: either you belong to the group of bystanders and passers-by who indifferently continue and do nothing; or you stop, let yourself be touched by those injured fellow human beings and roll up your sleeves. That is the only distinction, the ‘criterion’ that matters, ‘the decision of exclusion or inclusion’, against which our social, political, economic, and religious projects must be judged. “Which side are you on?”, is the implicit question that Francis asks each of us here.

## **2. The Encyclical: A Continuation of Francis’ Renewal**

As I want to argue, *Fratelli Tutti* does not so much offer a new contribution to Catholic social thought, instead it is a continuation of the renewal Pope Francis started right from the beginning of his pontificate. This hypothesis can be demonstrated by taking a closer look at both the inspirational sources and the content.

First, the inspirational sources.

At the beginning of his first social encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, Francis refers to the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew and his commitment to ecology, which inspired the reflections and actions of the pope – a quite remarkable statement at that time (§7-8). Usually, the documents of Catholic social teaching offer a contribution to their own particular tradition, almost exclusively referring to the texts of this official teaching. By referring to the Patriarch, the pope pushes this tradition a step further and confirms the relationship with other Christian denominations, stating the ecumenical dialogue as an example and source for Catholic social teaching.

Within this context, it does not come as a surprise that *Fratelli Tutti* cites the meeting between Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb and their common declaration on justice and peace as the most inspirational source for this new encyclical (§5). Through their meeting, the pope was formally encouraged to write the encyclical, but the letter shows their common declaration also inspired him

in terms of content. In line with *Laudato Si'*, the pope thus reemphasizes that Catholic social teaching has not only its own sources to consult in response to current situations – its so-called ‘body of social teaching’ – but that these reflections are also influenced by and nurtured from outside, from sources outside its internal tradition. As these encyclicals show, Pope Francis is the embodiment of the call he made in *Evangelii Gaudium* for both ecumenical and interreligious dialogue to help foster peace and justice.

In the same vein, it should not be overlooked that *Fratelli Tutti* refers to the local bishops’ conference which implies that Pope Francis valorizes the contribution of those local communities to enrich Catholic social teaching, rather than believing that the official teaching should merely inspire those local reflections. In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between the universal, official teaching and the local social thought. Put differently, in his method, he remains faithful to his focus on ‘dialogue’ and ‘culture of encounter’. It can be considered as an example of ‘practice what you preach’.

However, two critical comments can be raised. First, although the encyclical uses gender inclusive language, there is still some work to be done in order to let women’s voices speak in this debate. Neither in his references nor in his enumeration of the people who inspired him, does Francis mention any women by name.<sup>2</sup> The criticism because of the title – that it concerns *Fratelli*, and not *Fratelli e Sorelli*, brothers and sisters – is only symptomatic but it points to a more fundamental problem which deserves to be taken seriously.<sup>3</sup> Second, the fact that the pope refers mainly to his personal writings and speeches, gives rise to some criticisms. Some could use this as an argument to show that his teaching is not in line with former Catholic social teaching, and thus can be ignored as it is not really embedded in the tradition of Catholic social teaching. Others would argue, however, that by doing this, the pope ensures that what he has said on other occasions is now elevated to the level of ‘magisterial teachings’ and thus cannot be reduced to ‘personal reflections’. By adding those reflections to an encyclical, considered to be the highest authoritative source, he passes on his legacy for Catholic social teaching.<sup>4</sup> Whatever side one chooses will depend on how one conceives pope Francis and his pontificate. The jury is still out...

Second, in terms of content.

From the moment the encyclical came out, colleagues from across the globe were looking for ‘the new thing’ in this encyclical. I am not convinced it is that innovative in light of the rest of tradition of Catholic social thought. In my opinion, the contribution of the encyclical lies mainly in the continuation of his renewal of Catholic social thought. It is also a deepening of his understanding of this thought. In that sense it is unequivocal. Often Catholic social teaching tends to be so nuanced about certain issues that it remains quite ambivalent, which leads to the critique that everyone can

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Fratelli Tutti*, §286: “In these pages of reflection on universal fraternity, I felt inspired particularly by Saint Francis of Assisi, but also by others of our brothers and sisters who are not Catholics: Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi and many more.”

<sup>3</sup> Clark, Meghan. “*Fratelli Tutti* Shares Practical Wisdom, but Lacks Insights of Women”. *National Catholic Reporter*, 5 Oct. 2020. [www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/fratelli-tutti-shares-practical-wisdom-lacks-insights-women](http://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/fratelli-tutti-shares-practical-wisdom-lacks-insights-women). Accessed 7 Dec. 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Pandemics, Politics and Solidarity: A Discussion of Fratelli Tutti*. YouTube, uploaded by Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, 20 Oct. 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1gdG8huaWA>. This webinar was organized by Boston College with Meghan Clark, Massimo Faggioli, David Gibson, and Damon Silvers, as keynote speakers. Accessed 7 Dec. 2020.

read anything into these documents, as long as one stresses particular paragraphs or documents and leaves out others. Both ‘conservatives’ and ‘progressives’, ‘right’- or ‘left’-wing claim to find inspiration and arguments to plead for either neoliberal capitalism or social democrat state interventions or even collectivism. Such extremes fail to do justice to the richness and complexity of the tradition of Catholic social teaching, but it is rather simple to cut passages from their original context and thus apply so-called ‘proof-texting’ to prove your point. This becomes even more complex depending on which pope you choose to quote from: Leo XIII, Paul VI or John Paul II, it can make a difference. In any case, there remains some level of ambivalence and ambiguity in Catholic social teaching even while it aims to provide some ‘indicators’ for how one can build and sustain society and the good life for all. For this reason, I often compare Catholic social teaching with a pendulum which moves from one side to the other, depending on the historical era and the context and personality of the pope.

In my opinion, Pope Francis thus clarifies in which direction the pendulum should swing according to him on a number of issues where his choice is unambiguous and univocal. This seems to be the case for at least three issues: (1) his view on private property; (2) the question of the legitimacy of ‘just war’ and (3) the relationship between love and justice.

(1) First, his view on the role of private property. How should we conceive of private property? Is there a right to private property? And what are its limitations, if any? Already in the first encyclical of Catholic social teaching, *Rerum Novarum*, written in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, these questions were raised. Recall that we are in the context of industrialization and rising capitalism on the one hand and the growing influence and attraction of communistic socialism among laborers, Catholics included, on the other hand. Within this context, Leo XIII feels challenged to talk about the ‘inviolable principle’ of private property, dismissing the communist ideal of collectivism.<sup>5</sup>

Such statements reflect an ancient discussion: already in the first centuries of Christianity theologians and bishops discussed the role of private property – especially in light of the experience and examples of the first Christians who, according to the letter to the Corinthians, shared everything in common. A key text is Thomas Aquinas’ view which distinguishes the question and legitimacy of private property on the one hand and the use of it on the other. In general, this discussion aims to reconcile the two key principles of human dignity and the common good. While human dignity implies access to goods is necessary to lead a dignified life, and thus legitimizes private property as an opportunity to care for oneself and one’s loved ones, including the ability to build up savings to maintain a life together, the common good aims to realize this life for all. God created the world and all its goods for this aim and this universal destination of goods demands a just distribution so that all can have their fair share, which results in the ‘social function’ of private property. This universal destination of goods is so central, that Thomas Aquinas even held that one could steal from others in case of necessity as a last resort.<sup>6</sup>

In Catholic social teaching, we see this pendulum swing between an emphasis on private property and the universal destination of goods, and thus the social function of property. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis confirms the latter. He first questions the undeserved advantages which arbitrary

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Rerum Novarum*, §15: “The first and most fundamental principle, therefore, if one would undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property.”

<sup>6</sup> Cf. ST IIa IIae, q. 66, a. 7.

facts such as place of birth, race, talent, and religion can bring and which threaten human dignity: “The world exists for everyone, because all of us were born with the same dignity. Differences of colour, religion, talent, place of birth or residence, and so many others, cannot be used to justify the privileges of some over the rights of all. As a community, we have an obligation to ensure that every person lives with dignity and has sufficient opportunities for his or her integral development.” (§118) He then continues that “in the first Christian centuries, a number of thinkers developed a universal vision in their reflections on the common destination of created goods.” With remarkable quotes of two Church Fathers, he continues: “Not to share our wealth with the poor is to rob them and take away their livelihood. The riches we possess are not our own, but theirs as well”. In the words of Saint Gregory the Great, “When we provide the needy with their basic needs, we are giving them what belongs to them, not to us”. (§119) Hence, his statement:

I would observe that “the Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property”. The principle of the common use of created goods is the “first principle of the whole ethical and social order”; it is a natural and inherent right that takes priority over others. All other rights having to do with the goods necessary for the integral fulfilment of persons, including that of private property or any other type of property, should – in the words of Saint Paul VI – “in no way hinder [this right], but should actively facilitate its implementation”. The right to private property can only be considered a secondary natural right, derived from the principle of the universal destination of created goods. (§120)

Note that while Leo XIII considered private property a ‘natural’ right – some even claim ‘a sacred right’<sup>7</sup>, Pope Francis calls the common destination of goods a ‘natural and inherent right’ – thus making an unambiguous choice in the discussion on private property.

(2) A second example where Pope Francis makes a choice is with regard to the just war theory. In general, it is remarkable that he picks up on this theme, for it has been quite neglected in recent Catholic social teaching. It is typical for official Church teaching to not explicitly question former teachings, for this would raise questions on the legitimacy of any such teachings.<sup>8</sup> Ever since Augustine, the Catholic Church has acknowledged the idea of a ‘just war theory’ – even though it is striking considering Jesus’ pacifism. So, throughout more than 1500 years the Church has claimed that under certain, well-defined conditions, a war can be legitimate. What Francis does not do is question this just war theory as such, which would undermine its legitimacy. He does not suddenly plead for pacifism. What he does do is analyze the current context and from this analysis question whether the necessary conditions to be able to legitimize a war are still prevalent. For instance, one of those conditions is that the intended goal is greater than the damage done, so it should be a lesser

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Walsh, Michael. “Laying the Foundations: From *Rerum Novarum* to the Second Vatican Council.” *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Paul Vallely, SCM Press, 1998, p. 38; Velasquez, Manuel. “*Gaudium et Spes* and the Development of Catholic Social-Economic Teaching.” *Questions of Special Urgency*, edited by Judith A. Dwyer, Georgetown University Press, 1986, pp. 173-199.; Fortin, Ernest L. “From *Rerum Novarum* to *Centesimus Annus*: Continuity or Discontinuity?” *Faith & Reason*, vol. 17, 1991, p. 411.

<sup>8</sup> Clague, Julie. “Moral Theology and Doctrinal Change.” *Moral Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Celebration of Kevin Kelly*, edited by Bernard Hoose, Julie Clague, and Gerard Mannon, T&T Clark Theology, 2011, pp. 67-79.

evil. In a context of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and their destructive consequences, this pope questions whether one can still speak of a 'just war':

At issue is whether the development of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the enormous and growing possibilities offered by new technologies, have granted war an uncontrollable destructive power over great numbers of innocent civilians. The truth is that "never has humanity had such power over itself, yet nothing ensures that it will be used wisely". We can no longer think of war as a solution, because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a "just war". (§258)

Hence, he comes to the conclusion: "Never again war", which is a pacifist conclusion. It is important to see, however, that this is not driven by an evangelical pacificism, but by a current application and deductive reading of the ancient just war theory.

(3) A last example which shows how Francis thinks Catholic social teaching should be interpreted, has to do with the question of the relationship between neighborly love, charity, and justice. Central starting point is the double command to love God and to love our neighbor. As a command, neighborly love is a duty and thus obligatory. It is demanded by our Christian faith. In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict rightly affirms that *caritas* appears to be "essential" for the Church, since there exists an "unbreakable bond" (§16) between the two loves as "they form a single commandment" (§18). Moreover, in the context of globalization, the commandment to love the neighbor acquires a universal nature (§15). What the practical implications are, however, remains to be seen. How should this be done? Traditionally, we see two models appearing in Catholic social teaching, based on the distinction between charity and justice.

A first model conceives the call for love of neighbor as a matter of charity and charitable acts: we have a duty to offer aid to the sick, food to the hungry, shelter to the homeless, etc. Characteristic for those charitable acts is that they are about direct intervention, which tackles the symptoms of the problems – potentially resulting in a kind of *agapeism* that defends the primordially of love opposed to justice. This seems to be the guiding principle of Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2005). Based on the parable of the Good Samaritan, he emphasizes that the specificity of Christian charity lies in its response to concrete, immediate needs, so that the universal dimension of neighborly love manifests itself in "humanitarian aid" (§30), such as providing food, clothes, and shelter and in the fulfilment of charitable works (cf. §31), structured within humanitarian organizations which operate in the public sphere. In other words, in this approach, love of neighbor is identified with charity, defined as humanitarian aid and charitable works. The definition of charity at hand brings Benedict to separate it radically from justice, even up to the point where he implements a moral division of labor between the two: as the *opus proprium* (§29) of the Church, this kind of charity becomes its domain while establishing justice is the task of politics (§28a).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is not unthinkable that this division of labor between justice and charity becomes an excuse to consider a specific kind of societal engagement, namely justice as struggling for structural reforms, as merely a matter of the state, with a reduction of the Christian involvement as a consequence. The pope, however, does admit that the Church has a role to play in this search for justice, for its natural law approach, as consolidated in its social teachings, can inform the practical reasoning needed to discern the right principles of justice (§28a). Moreover, through the "formation of conscience" it can contribute "indirectly" to the establishment of justice (§29). The only "direct" task of the Church, however, is charity as fulfilled at all levels of the Church (§29-30). Within this framework the question remains what the contribution can be of those Catholic organizations

In contrast, a second model discerns, but does not separate, love and justice, and considers that neighborly love serves as a motivation for the commitment to justice. A very clear instance of this model can be found in *De Iustitia in Mundo*, the document of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1971. Herein the bishops state explicitly that neighborly love equates “love and service of neighbor which involve the fulfilment of the demands of justice.” (§33) In other words, love of God leads to the commandment of love of neighbor, resulting in the commitment to justice, because “Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated, [f]or love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbor.” (§34) Justice is structural, questioning the causes of poverty, illness, homelessness etc. As a consequence, it also belongs to the task of the Church to commit itself to the struggle for justice: the bishops claim – not uncontroversially – that a commitment to justice is “a constitutive dimension”<sup>10</sup> of the proclamation of the Word.

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis chose to align himself to this model. Already in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis held a plea to tackle the ‘root causes’ of problems created by the current economic system, and to implement ‘structural changes’ (§202). In this recent encyclical, he writes how charity is also institutional and abstract (§164) on the one hand and how justice is an ‘essential condition’ for universal fraternity (§173) on the other hand. That neighborly love or *caritas* can be implemented in two ways, is clearly outlined in the following comparison:

There is a kind of love that is “elicited”: its acts proceed directly from the virtue of charity and are directed to individuals and peoples. There is also a “commanded” love, expressed in those acts of charity that spur people to create more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures. It follows that “it is an equally indispensable act of love to strive to organize and structure society so that one’s neighbour will not find himself in poverty”. It is an act of charity to assist someone suffering, but it is also an act of charity, even if we do not know that person, to work to change the social conditions that caused his or her suffering. If someone helps an elderly person cross a river, that is a fine act of charity. The politician, on the other hand, builds a bridge, and that too is an act of charity. While one person can help another by providing something to eat, the politician creates a job for that other person, and thus practices a lofty form of charity that ennobles his or her political activity. (§186)

With such statements, Pope Francis reemphasizes the need and importance of a justice discourse in order to put neighborly love in practice.

Hence, I hope my main argument that *Fratelli Tutti* can thus be seen as continuation of the renewal Pope Francis started in 2013 is clear. Indeed, as it continues the main characteristics of this pontificate, namely its focus on dialogue and its lens of the perspective of the poor and marginalized,

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present in the civil society that struggle for justice: can they still be considered Catholic? More in general, the interpretation of neighborly love as charity as distinct from justice appears problematic for the Church as a whole. Why should the preferential love for the weakest not lead to the commitment to plead for their rights and to question the structural causes of their suffering, in short, for a commitment to justice?

<sup>10</sup> Schotte, Jan P. “The Synod of Bishops: A Permanent yet Adaptable Church Institution.” *Studia Canonica*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1992, p. 289.

this encyclical is indeed 'Franciscan', both in the sense of in line with Saint Francis and the personality and pontificate of Francis.

### **Conclusion: A Welcome Relief**

Viewed from the perspective of Catholic social thought, the analysis that love not only can be public and political, but indeed should be public and political may not seem so new. Just like the analysis that we have already come a long way with freedom and equality, but still fall short if we do not take fraternity into account. Without fraternity, our society will never be more than living side by side, separated from each other – no matter how equal and just it may become. Also, Francis' attention to what this means in terms of migration (hospitality and human dignity over the rights and interests of nations) and politics (with a view to carrying out analyses and taking measures for the most vulnerable) is not really surprising given the rest of the tradition of social thought in general, and his pontificate in particular.

However, viewed from our present time and its social and political climate, characterized by populism and neoliberalism, it sounds like a welcome relief. As does the hopeful perspective on which this encyclical is based. For despite the "dark clouds over a closed world", the message is ultimately – also typically Franciscan in several meanings of the word – joyful and positive. Because we believe in and entrust ourselves to God who works in the world, inside and outside the boundaries of the Church, and in the hearts of people, thus driving them towards a good and better future.